

Tajikistan

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Freedom of the Press

Freedom of speech is guaranteed by the constitution. However, President Emomali Rahmon's administration maintains intense pressure on the country's independent media and further restricted press freedom in 2013 during the run-up to the presidential election in November.

In 2010, a draft Law on Mass Media of Tajikistan was proposed to replace the 1990 Law on Press and Other Mass Media. The bill was criticized by human rights groups, which argued that it did not meet international standards. After more than two years of discussion among government officials, legislators, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the parliament finally passed the new law in 2013, and it took effect in March. The law contains a number of protections for media workers, broadens the definition and rights of a journalist, attempts to limit the formation of media monopolies, and guarantees access to public information. The information provision strengthens Tajikistan's little-known 2002 freedom of information law, which is poorly structured and virtually ignored by officials. However, while the new law obliges all government bodies to respond promptly to information requests, the lack of an implementation mechanism and vaguely defined exceptions—such as state secrets and “information protected by law”—leave room for both arbitrary interpretation of the measure and general inefficiency in its application. Other provisions, such as those requiring media outlets to explain their editorial bent to government authorities, have sparked concerns by some media observers that the law may undermine editorial independence.

A law to decriminalize libel was adopted in July 2012. However, journalists still face criminal penalties, including fines and jail time, for insulting Rahmon and other public officials. In January 2013, Rustam Hukumov, the son of the state rail company chief, filed a libel case against the weekly *Imruz News* following a 2012 article that questioned the reasons behind Hukumov's early release from a Russian jail, where he had been serving a sentence for drug trafficking. After closed proceedings, the court ordered the paper to pay damages of 50,000 somoni (\$10,500) to Hukumov and publicly apologize to him.

Tajikistan's media licensing committee routinely denies licenses to independent outlets or otherwise obstructs the licensing process. No member of an independent media outlet has ever become a member of the licensing committee. In February 2013, the authorities denied professional accreditation to veteran journalist Abdukayumov Kayumzoda, a former correspondent with the independent broadcaster Radio Ozodi. Foreign media outlets have also been denied Tajik broadcasting licenses in the past, and reporters from international outlets are not invited to official events and press conferences. The new media law stipulates that all media outlets in Tajikistan must be registered as legal entities, which could ease licensing complications.

The government monitors internet activity, particularly on social-networking websites. In October 2013, the government announced the “Ethics Code for an e-Citizen,” a set of guidelines for users of the internet and personal electronic devices. The code prohibits a broad range of actions and content, from slander, “provocation,” and “offensive content” to speaking too loudly on the phone. While the code is not legally enforceable, some internet users expressed fears that it could be used to justify further censorship of internet content that is critical of the government.

As the November presidential election approached, the government intensified its control over the media, especially online, where the opposition has been most active. Throughout the year, the authorities had

periodically blocked access to independent social-networking and news websites. In January, the state telecommunications agency ordered the blocking of websites including Facebook, the local news portals TJNews and TopTJ, the site of Radio Ozodi, and the Tajik service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. The sites had provided critical coverage of key local issues and speculated about the outcome of the November election. According to some reports, state telecommunications director Beg Zukhorov claimed that the public had requested the blocks, and accused social-media users of insulting “respectable people.” The website of the opposition Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) was unavailable for several weeks in April. While Zukhorov denied any government involvement, a representative of the site’s internet service provider told the IRPT that the problem was not a technical one. The government blocked YouTube on at least three occasions during the year, including once in May after a video showing Rahmon singing and dancing at his son’s 2007 wedding went viral. The video, which highlighted the stark contrast between the excesses of Tajikistan’s ruling family and the modest lives of a majority of its citizens, provided important fodder for Rahmon’s political opponents.

There was little genuine political debate during the election campaign in the mainstream media, according to international observers. There are no independent television stations in Tajikistan, and state-owned media outlets provided only positive coverage of Rahmon during the election period. Though state broadcasters are required by law to provide equal airtime to opposition candidates, the relentlessly positive coverage of Rahmon gave an obvious advantage to the incumbent. Investigative reporting is rare in Tajikistan given the difficult conditions faced by journalists. Independent journalists are particularly hampered by a lack of legislation protecting sources. Authorities frequently prevent independent reporters from covering the news, for example by blocking access to official events or barring journalists from taking photographs.

The government’s repeated blocking of Facebook has increased public interest in the site as well as in other social media. Robust political debate and criticism of Rahmon’s administration could be found on many sites throughout the year, with a growing number of young professionals joining the debate in the run-up to the election. Many social-media users made bold use of political cartoons or altered images to ridicule the president, while a movement to boycott the vote—which presented no real choice—was launched online and grew particularly popular through Platforma, the country’s largest Facebook group for political discussion. Despite the openness of this online debate, only 16 percent of Tajikistan’s population regularly used the internet in 2013.

Journalists reporting on sensitive issues face threats, attacks, libel suits, and other forms of harassment. In February 2013, Tajik journalist Bakhtiyor Sattori was stabbed in Moscow by an unidentified assailant. Sattori, who previously worked at the Tajik embassy in Moscow, had recently become a vocal critic of the regime and an outspoken supporter of opposition leader Umarali Kuvvatov, leading many to believe that the attack was ordered by someone in the president’s inner circle. Salimboy Shamsiddinov, a journalist and Uzbek minority leader in Khatlon Province who has been critical of the government, disappeared in March after issuing a public call for ethnic Uzbeks to support an opposition candidate in the presidential election. In July, officials claimed to have found his body in Uzbekistan, but family members were unable to confirm his identity. In October, journalist Mahmadyusuf Ismoilov was sentenced to 11 years in prison on charges of fraud and extortion after publishing an article that criticized Asht district authorities in March. He had previously been arrested in 2010 and detained for 11 months after publishing a similar article about corruption in Asht. Abdurakhim Shukurov, a camera operator with the Ozodagon News Agency, was arrested in late December while covering the high-profile sentencing hearing of opposition leader Zaid Saidov. Shukurov suffered injuries from a beating he received while in custody. He remained in administrative detention at year’s end.

According to the government, there are more than 350 registered print publications, about 200 of which are privately owned. Roughly half of all print publications are issued on an irregular schedule. The

broadcast sector is dominated by state-controlled national television stations that praise Rahmon and deny coverage to independent or opposition points of view. Tajik journalists claim that state-run media outlets often publicize letters from fabricated entities in which independent journalists and opposition figures are smeared. Several regions in Tajikistan lack access to independent television or radio broadcasts. Although there are no independent television stations in Tajikistan, international networks, including those based in Russia, are increasingly available through satellite services. Electricity shortages limit overall access to electronic media, and government control over distribution limits the reach of print media. In addition, widespread poverty, a small advertising market, and the concentration of wealth in the hands of political leaders and their associates hamper the emergence of financially robust and independent media outlets.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

80

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

25

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

30

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

25